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ABSTRACT

Like the language of any group in American society that struggles for an identity, the language or dialects used by women in higher education, must be studied, researched, and represented within the curriculum, notably within the literary curriculum. A group's behavior, and often its self-esteem, is expressed within the constraints of the group's language. Women in higher education are no exception. To argue for the restructuring of American English would be ridiculous and absurd. The intent should not be to "desex" language so much as to make those persons who work in an environment of higher education aware that language units should be added to disciplines or curricula in order to contribute to women's self-esteem rather than detract from women's sense of self. It is the use of neutral terms which treat individuals of both sexes with dignity and respect that should be stressed. (RAE)

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VALUE JUDGMENTS IN AMERICAN ENGLISH

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Value Judgments in American English

Like any group in American society that struggles for an identity, the language or dialects used by that group, particularly by women in higher education, must be studied, researched, and presented within the curriculum, notably within the literary curricula. A group's behavior and often its self-esteem is expressed within the constraints of the group's language. Women in higher education are no exception. Women's support systems, their networking, their roles, and their communication are based on the language they utilize--either consciously or unconsciously.

Within various disciplines, whether they be within areas such as the social sciences, the humanities, or communication arts and sciences, diverse questions such as the following warrant an examination. I'd like to examine:

1. Just how "sexist" is American English?
2. How do mere cosmetic terms such as "dog," "fox," "bitch," "chick," and "beaver," which are derived from animals, affect and impair the self-esteem of

women?

3. What labels are given to women if they possess certain job titles, e.g., "woman administrator" vs. "administrator," "female instructor" vs. "instructor," "female boss" rather than "boss," etc.?
4. What non-parallel constructions exist within the language, such as "men and girls" rather than "men and women?"
5. Demeaning and derogatory labels exist, such as "honey," "dear," "sweetie," "babe," etc., that treat women as objects of consumption.
6. Are terms which differentiate only on the basis of sex, such as "poetess" instead of "poet" and "lady mayor" instead of "mayor," appropriate?

To argue for the restructuring of American English would appear to be ridiculous and absurd. Proposing new terms such as "shim" in order to replace "she" or "he" and "gen" for "man" or "mankind" represent extreme solutions and ones subject to ridicule. The intent should not be to "desex" language so much as to make those persons who work in an environment of higher education aware that language units should be added to disciplines or curricula in order to contribute women's self-esteem rather than detract from women's sens f self. It is the use of neutral terms which

treat individuals of both sexes with dignity and respect that should be stressed.

It is apparent that many Indo as well as non Indo-European language are sexist in lexicon. Certainly, American English is no exception. Terms which demean women, such as "broad," where there are no male counterpart terms, are based only on a sense of appearance in this culture. A man is not viewed in terms of the expanse of his hips nor even do words derived from animals denigrate man. The term "wolf" is even looked upon favorably as almost evoking an "All-American boy" image--the image of a true "Tom Jones" (a novel by Henry Fielding) sense of a rogue or a good-looking vagabond. Even barnyard terms originating from the rooster, such as "King of the Roost" and "cock," evoke a strong, powerful image. Contrast these terms to words such as "chick," "bitch," and "dog"--terms which detract from a powerful image, negate sincerity and seriousness, and, in short, focus on negative self-image and detract from women's sense of self-worth. Consider the "CB" term of seat cover for a woman. Surely, these are terms which tend to treat women as objects of consumption never to be taken seriously in any role, much less a role in higher education.

Why is it, for example, that different adjectives are used to describe the same trait inherent in both men and women? Dichotomies are apparent, such as men "talking"

while women "chatter," men "laughing" while women "giggle," amd men "shouting" while women are "screaming" (often in so-called shrilled voices). The hackneyed example of which many in higher education are at least conscious still holds validity, i.e., a man is "assertive" or "aggressive" while a woman is "bitchy." Are "drives" always to be masculine and "wiles" to be femininie? Is "intuition" indeed a trait whose presence or absence is determined by one's femininity or masculinity? Need the order even in grammatical paradigms always be "he, she, and it" or "men and women" rather than "she, he, and it" or "women and men?"

It is the use of specific terms in relation to sex with which those connected to higher education must be particularly concerned. It is not appropriate to compare women and men in the same profession through the use of such terms as "female or women doctors" alongside of "male or men doctors," or "female professor" when the term "male professor" is rarely if ever used. One senses that doctors and professors will do nicely without a designation of their sex. These are but examples of many non-parallel constructions, and they unfortunately remain the norm not only in higher education but in other professions as well.

It is particularly gruesome to a sense of dignity to women when the group in an office is referred to as "men and girls" or the term "girl" is used to refer to an adult

female, especially when the term is applied to a stranger. It is just as inappropriate to address women with whom one does not have a close relationship as "sweetie," "dear," or "honey." Fortunately, these terms are becoming obsolete.

Aside from the more obvious use of sexist terms one sees examples of, a language backlash has occurred in American English to add an often undetected, more subtle form of sexist language women often encounter in higher education: that is the use of neutral terms when applied to women accompanied by a return to sexist terms when applied to men. For example, the term "chairperson" is frequently used to describe a female who chairs a department, yet when the chair happens to be a male, the term "chairman" is reverted to. Another example is spokesman/spokesperson. Note also that this same form of subtlety has occurred with the use of the term "Ms". The objection to sexism and modes of address in English was, of course, that a person's marital status need not be revealed nor judged in order for effective job performance to take place. Certainly "Mr." did not specify a man's state of singularity or plurality. Thus, "Ms." was to have been used to both "Miss" and "Mrs." Now, however, "Ms." has become synonomous with "Miss" while "Mrs." has remained intact.

What are some possible solutions or some general guidelines that might be followed when thinking about the

various disciplines such as literature or when speaking or writing in or for higher education? Perhaps the point to be stressed is that communicators should attempt not to demean and should avoid derogatory connotations and stereotypes which treat women--usually unconsciously--as inferior, lacking control in their lives, and attributing superficiallity to women when it does not in actuality exist. In short, those who write and speak throughout higher education must learn to avoid sexist designations and labels. Terms which belittle should be avoided, as should terms which may be characterized as "cosmetic summations." What, for example, does one's body shape have to do with one's mind or with one's ability to manage people? By the way, Women's magazines tend to promote denigration of women leading to low self-esteem. They tend to focus on self-improvement issues: diet, hair, makeup, and dress. The mere fact that they focus on these continuously really gives women the message that there is something wrong with them.

Some general tendencies in the language are beginning to unfold. Certainly, words within linquistic contexts have the ability to ameliorate or pejorate, i.e., to broaden or narrow in meaning. It has been suggested, for example, that men use silence very well when communicating and that women, "people-pleasers" that they are often described as, fill in the gaps. It is women that theoretically ask ninety percent

of the questions and are then accused of asking too many questions, of being too communicative.

Some solutions do exist. The use of universal terms when referring to people certainly helps. For example, "I think the reader will use his critical ability" can be replaced by "I think you will use your critical ability" or "I think the writers will use their critical ability." The use of third person or passive voice, a style most scholars were forced to abandon when they were enrolled in their first graduate seminar, is another useful alternative. "Students are influenced by their instructors" is preferable to "The student is influenced by his instructors." Finally, greater efforts can be made by faculty and administrators alike in employing neutral terms throughout higher education, particularly in the dissemination of information to higher education's many publics.

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